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The Failure of Protestantism

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The Present Religious Transition

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The Failure of Protestantism

I am to speak to you today on the Failure of Protestantism; and what I shall have to say must be understood largely in the light of what I have already said in the two previous addresses in this series. I have already treated the fundamental reasons for the general break-up of Christianity as a whole; and I have discussed the history and significance of the Roman Catholic Church, showing you how it has been going through a gradual process of disintegration during the last three or four hundred years. Now Protestantism is a movement within Christianity itself which started some 400 years ago in the interest of freedom from the domination, the blind faith, the denial of liberty, and general inhumanity of the Catholic church. And the question which we are to answer this morning is whether or not this freedom has been actually achieved; and I think that we shall find as an answer to that question that Protestantism, though professedly based on the recognition of the right of private judgment, has attempted at the same time to assert the authority of the Christian scriptures over the minds and consciences of men as the veritable word of God; so that the freedom which it gives with one hand it takes away with the other. It frees us from the authority of an institution merely to place us in bondage to a book. Hence, Protestantism in practise maintains exactly the same inhibitory influence over the free exercise of human intelligence as does the Catholic Church.

In so far as the interest of the people in Protestantism is concerned, we find about the same conditions as in the Catholic church. Mr. McCabe in his "Decay of the Church of Rome" shows quite conclusively that this oldest branch of the church has lost a hundred million followers in a hundred years. I do not think that the Protestant churches, being more progressive and less offensive in their tactics, have lost so heavily, but the extraordinary decrease in church-going in the larger cities especially is extremely suggestive. Even this is admitted by the Protestant leaders themselves, though they think it is the result of the age of the automobile and the desire for recreation, rather than of any inherent weakness in Protestantism itself. In spite of all the tricks and devices of the clergy—the vestments and concerts, the strange lighting effects and color schemes, the sensational subjects and still more sensational antics, the matrimonial agencies and philanthropic coercion, the hand shakings and

back-slappings—the people still fall away. In fact if we are to judge by church-going statistics we can no longer say that even the majority of people in Europe and America are Christians.

But all this I have discussed in a previous address. The problem we are interested in this morning is why Protestantism has not succeeded, why when it broke away from the great body of the church which was holding the world in bondage, it did not actually adapt itself to the new world. We want to find in what consists the weakness, the failure of the Protestant churches. And in doing this I shall speak first of some directions in which Protestantism has been a success, just as I did two weeks ago when I treated the Catholic church. A great historic movement such as we are discussing cannot simply be called good or bad, a success or a failure; it is a mixture, both good and bad, both a success and a failure. The Reformation brought in its train many improvements, some intended and some incidental, many of them indirect and even contrary to the aims of the promoters. But it also blighted much that is precious in human life, and cast a shadow over generations to come. It was partly a forward movement and partly a backward movement. And we cannot intelligently discuss the one phase without at least noticing the other. If we would derive permanent benefit from the past we must learn to see both the good and the bad in a historic movement, we must note wherein it has succeeded and wherein it has failed. Let us therefore first note in what respects it has been successful.

I.

The greatest success of Protestantism perhaps lies in the fact that it was an actual break with the Catholic church, and not merely a reform of that church. And in this respect Luther, the greatest of the reformers, was great, and not merely the principles which he enunciated. Luther did not despise tradition and authority, upon which the Catholic church was founded. He did not attack the pope and his power to forgive sins. He merely opposed the cheap and tawdry way in which indulgences were sold by the papal agents. And the protest against this he made as a faithful son of the church. He declared that the Roman Church was in a wretched state, but (to use his own words) "this is not a sufficient reason for separating from it. On the contrary the worse things are going on within it the more should we cling to it; for it is not by separation that we shall make it better." So Luther was not looking for separation; he stepped out of the church

only because he had to. And I do not know of a sublimer instance of the courage and the daring which a simple inward necessity may put into a man. He took his stand because, as he said before the assembled hosts of authority at Worms, "Ich kann nicht anders." I have not time, neither is it necessary to repeat the story of Luther's life. It was picturesque and shot through with dramatic incidents. He was a personality of heroic proportions, the incidents of whose life moved dramatically on to that grand climax when he took his historic stand at Worms, saying he would not recant, because an act against conscience, though both church and empire should approve, is neither right nor safe. The world would not have fared so well if Erasmus had stood there. He and the other reformers insisted upon staying within the church, upon compromising at any cost, in order to reform from within. The other reformers were like those liberals today who sympathize with modern thought, but feel that they cannot stand on their own feet outside the orthodox church. Above every other fear is that of breaking with the past, of a seeming disloyalty to the institution which has nurtured them. But Luther rose triumphantly above this and insisted upon loyalty to his personal convictions; and if the church refused him the right to express these, he would do it in spite of the church.

I wonder if you realize the significance of this scene. It is difficult to understand today what a tremendous thing Luther had to face. To break with any form of Christianity in these days is an insignificant matter compared with what Luther did when he placed himself outside the pale of that institution which held the keys of earth as truly as it claimed to hold those of heaven. For though the Catholic church is comparatively harmless now, then it was an empire that brooked no rival. Even the state was subservient to this mighty power. The officers of this empire were not amenable to civil law, and they were given a free hand in dealing with their subjects. And this great power, which controlled every relation of human life, centered in Rome, and its affairs were administered, not for the benefit of its subjects but to heighten the influence and glory and to swell the revenues of the popes and princes of the church. It was this empire over the souls and bodies of men; over life and death and what was believed to come after death; over what men should think and how they should act—it was this empire that was broken and shattered beyond repair when Martin Luther cried "Hier stehe ich, ich kann nicht anders; so helfe mir, Gott." And before talking about the failure of Protestantism we should appreciate this service, and cry, "All

hail, thou valiant man, for this first and mighty blow." We breathe freer now at the very thought of it. Other blows have followed as a result of this courage; so that today, in spite of every reform the Catholic church may inaugurate, in spite of all the efforts it may undertake to harmonize itself with modern thought and political freedom, in spite of all its conversions here and there of an occasional man or woman, it will never again have its old supremacy. It is an outgrown institution, humanity has passed it by, and in time it will disappear.

This was the first and greatest success of Protestantism. The second is somewhat related to it. Virtue and morality had become an external formal thing in the Catholic Church. It tends to do this in every religion. It first creates certain forms and then loses itself in them; and as men are counted good citizens who pay their taxes and vote, irrespective of their motive in so doing; so men were counted good Christians who simply obeyed the rules of the church, who said so many Ave Marias and Paternosters, did so much fasting and penance, or received such and such sacraments. There was an external test of character; and Protestantism proposed an internal test. Luther said that piety consists not in outward works, but in inward principle; that the value of an act is determined by the motive. He spoke in very involved theological language, and so has frequently been misunderstood; but it seems to me that the fundamental significance of his great doctrine of justification by faith rather than by works was simply that the attitude of a man determined his worth, that his value depended not upon the outward life but upon the inward impulse which prompted that life. Thus Protestantism sprang from a quickening of the conscience and a deepening of the moral life; and in so far as it is true to its original spirit today, it is more inward, more searching than Catholicism. Its religion is more personal, it places men more directly in touch with the central truth of things, and in general emphasizes more the need of an ethical life. I do not say this of Protestantism everywhere. In England it was merely a political affair, and instead of heightening the moral life, it came into being only with a lowering of it, as the result of the intrigues of a corrupt king. The Puritans were the first real Protestants in England. And so there are any number of instances today where the Protestant churches have fallen back into a lifeless formalism; but in general Protestantism brought a new moral seriousness into life. Of course this doctrine of justification by faith later became one of the weaknesses of Protestantism. It was emphasized to the exclusion of ethical works as well as ceremonial works, and Protestants for years have insisted that

a man is saved only by faith in certain creeds and dogmas, regardless of the kind of life he lives, and the good Christian becomes thereby, not the man whose life is right, but the man whose faith is right, which is a very significant failure of Protestantism. However, I am willing to concede in a general way that Protestantism was an improvement over Catholicism in the direction of right living as a vital element of religion.

A third success of Protestantism lies in the fact that it has given us freedom of conscience. Here we must confess that Luther himself was not so great as the logic of the movement which he started. Luther did not advocate freedom of conscience as a principle; he desired freedom simply for his own conscience. But the logic of history does not rest on any individual's partial interpretation of it. When Luther said at Worms "It is not safe or right to do anything against conscience" he virtually stood for every sincere reformer since; he spoke for every progressive movement in thought and society down to the present day. It is not fair therefore to charge the narrowness and bigotry of many protestants, whether individuals or churches, to their Protestantism. It is to be charged to them as men or as institutions, and can only be due to the lack of real Protestantism. The very meaning of Protestantism is to protest in the interest of freedom. For instance Puritanism was a characteristic Protestant movement for it was a protest against the laxness and formalism of the English church. Likewise Unitarianism was a characteristic Protestant movement, for it was a protest of reason and conscience against the dogmas of orthodoxy. When anyone stands for personal freedom of conviction against any authority, he is in very essence a Protestant; and in so far as any one surrenders personal conviction to authority he fails as a Protestant. For instance, when Luther persecuted Carlstadt, when Calvin burned Servetus, when the Puritans banished Roger Williams, they were not Protestants—they repudiated the very principles by which they secured their own freedom. It takes a long time for a principle injected into history to work out its consequences, but sooner or later it does. The principle of freedom of conscience is perhaps first realized in any significant degree in this country; but it is a fruit of Protestantism; it was thrown in among the forces of history by Martin Luther, though he did not know what he was doing.

II.

There is a fourth thing which I rank as a success of Protestantism, but which Protestants themselves would

not so classify. Several weeks ago I gave as one of the fundamental reasons for the general break-up of Christianity the work of Martin Luther, and I shall now enlarge upon this somewhat as a success of Protestantism, or at least as a good which Protestantism has bestowed upon the world. As a result of this spirit of freedom working in connection with the tendencies of modern thought, not only the old church, but the old religion is gradually breaking up. Christianity itself is dissolving and passing away. Christianity was not nearly so much hurt by the direct attacks made upon it by men like Voltaire and Paine and Ingersoll as it is by the indirect influence of science and criticism, which are largely the result of the Reformation. Men who have never heard Christianity directly attacked are gaining a new conception of the world from the intellectual atmosphere which they breathe, and the old ideas of providence and miracle and prayer drop away so quietly they do not even miss them. The new thought is in literature, in poetry, in science, in the magazine and daily newspaper. The difference between cultivated men in all churches and in none have practically vanished, the only real difference being in the way these thoughts are concealed by those within the churches. If we do not discuss specific doctrines, but simply note how they are reflected in a man's attitude toward life, we find that educated Presbyterians do not differ essentially from educated Unitarians. Their particular denominational connections are a matter of birth and habit, while their religion is, under a disguise of pius names and phrases, a reverence for that which is good and true. It might as easily be labelled Humanism as Christianity. The particular doctrines which originally differentiated the various denominations have no interest for any one except an antiquarian or a zealot. Now this is the natural result of this principle of freedom of conscience and private judgment, for which Protestantism is largely responsible. As it grew it was no longer content with interpreting the bible, it began to judge the worth of the bible. Luther made the conscience supreme over the authority of the church, but as this idea grew conscience became supreme over the authority of the bible too. And still more, it became supreme over the authority of any person in the bible; and yet when Jesus ceases to be an authority, Christianity in any distinctive sense has ceased to exist. Luther would have stood aghast at those who repudiate the bible as an infallible authority, and still more at those to whom Jesus is no longer lord and master; yet no other result could ultimately follow, and in the last analysis he is responsible for it. So the principle which gave birth to Protestantism is gradually strangling it to death; and

in the future this result will be considered as one of the successes of Protestantism.

There is still another point which may be regarded as both a success and a failure of Protestantism, namely: that Protestantism has practically given us the bible, for it was almost a sealed book before the Reformation. The common people in the time of Luther knew nothing of the bible; but just as the Renaissance revived an interest in the old Greek and Roman literatures, so the Reformation put the old Jewish and the early Christian literatures in languages that could be read by the people. Everywhere the bible became the property of the common man, and the biblical characters took on an added significance. So far Protestantism was a success, for it is well that the world should know the bible. It has played a large part in the development of civilization, and contains elements of unsurpassed worth. Most of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, as well as those of the early followers of Jesus in the New Testament came from real men, to whom religion was not a convention nor a sham, but whose minds were intent upon the supreme thing in life—the accomplishment of right living. The very superstitious reverence that many have had for the bible is a testimony of its power. But while in this respect the open bible of Protestantism was one of its successes, in another way it has been and is coming more and more to be a source of its failure, as I hope now to show you.

The bible glows with the ideal of righteousness as perhaps no other collection of early literature, and to those who know how to read it, it will always be a means of moral inspiration. But one must know how to read it, because the whole intellectual setting of this idea is no longer true for us; and it is difficult for most people to distinguish between the content and the setting. In this age of natural law we are confused by having righteousness regarded as the will of a supernatural being; and in this time of culture it is difficult for us to accept as authority the righteousness of a people who lived on the borderland of barbarism. Its ideal of righteousness is forever valuable, but the whole state of culture in which it was embodied is now superseded. We cannot think today as the bible would have us think, we cannot believe as the bible would have us believe, we cannot live as the bible would have us live; because we live in a different kind of world—a world separated from that in which the bible was produced, not merely by 2,000 years of time, but by 2,000 years of experience, of thought of knowledge. Passing over the minor difficulties, what man,

who is a product of the culture of today, can believe in the kingdom of heaven as Jesus believed in it; what man can look out over the world as we know it and trust in a personal providence as Jesus trusted; what man can believe in miracles now as Jesus believed in them acquainted as we are with the constancy of natural forces; what man can pray as Jesus would have him pray. Jesus is no longer an authority for us, neither is any other part of the bible—the whole thing represents a point of view that has long since been outgrown. People only fancy that the bible is an authority for them, as they are not really acquainted with it, as they have never studied it in the light of the circumstances in which it was written. So Protestantism hoping to rule the world with its bible is a failure. And that is what Protestantism has tried to do. It is just as much a religion of authority as the Catholic religion is, only it has shifted the authority from a person to a book, from the pope to the bible.

And even though the bible were all that they claim for it, as an infallible authority it must be a failure; because, as I said two weeks ago, there can be no such thing as an infallible book, unless you have for that book an infallible interpreter. A book that is subject to the interpretation of any individual cannot be an infallible guide, because each individual interprets it to suit his own whims. For instance we have a constitution of the United States, but what would it be worth if each individual in this country were permitted to interpret it to suit himself? In order to make it a workable instrument we have a body of men whose business it is to interpret it for us. Every time a question arises in regard to the meaning of our constitution, it goes before the supreme court which tells us what the constitution means in this regard. It may tell us right or it may tell us wrong, but in any case there is no further appeal. It is the infallible interpreter of the constitution. And so the pope is the infallible interpreter of the bible; but when Protestantism cut loose from the pope and held on to the bible as an authority, it placed itself in a thoroughly illogical position; and this has been one of its greatest failures. So the reformation remains unfinished, and we must continue it until every vestige of external authority in religion disappears, and the supreme authority of the individual conscience is established.

And in this establishment of the bible as an infallible authority lies the next great failure of Protestantism. For what was the result? They said, the bible represents the voice of God on earth. Its theories concerning

the world, concerning God, concerning the past history of man and his destiny—these theories it announced not as the speculations of the Jewish people several thousand years ago, but as the undoubted and eternal word of God. And what happened? Why, the intellectual enthusiasm of the world, which gained its impetus from the reformers themselves, began to investigate and find new knowledge, and formulate theories of the world and existence which were in direct contradiction to those taught in the bible; with the inevitable result that these old theories were burst through on every hand; and the church began the long battle to maintain its authority. It could not admit that there were mistakes in the bible, for fear that the whole religious system would come crashing to the ground, therefore it must oppose these new findings of science. It must oppose the discoveries in astronomy; it must fight the new theories of chemistry; it must oppose the new physics, the new geology, the new biology, the new political economy, the new social ideas of man; and so it is perfectly consistent that those who best represent Protestant orthodoxy today should be fighting the doctrine of evolution, should be seeking to exclude from our schools and universities all teachings that contradict the theories advanced in the bible. And so this doctrine of infallibility of the bible has placed the Protestant church directly across the path to progress as an enemy of the truth, as something reactionary and hostile to knowledge, which has fallen far behind the intellect of the educated community. This restraint has shackled the mind, and placed a premium upon ignorance; and so it naturally follows that the most ignorant will always be the most orthodox. In fact all that is needed to be orthodox is a competent ignorance and an active conceit. With this furnishing one can throw out all modern knowledge and all modern methods of dealing with evil, and console himself by thinking he is rescuing souls from eternal damnation. And surely this is an evidence of failure; for if the church could have had its way, we would still be living according to the intellectual and moral standards of a book written in a stage of culture just emerging from barbarism, modern civilization would never have developed, and humanity would have been ruined. We should still be living in a welter of superstition and intellectual abjectness of every kind. It is in spite of the Christian church that civilization has advanced and that some of these real evils have been overcome. Only the irresistible impulse of human nature reaching out after the good and the true has saved humanity from destruction by the ecclesiastical organization.

III.

And this leads me directly to its greatest failure, namely: that it has not given us any new faith such as the world needs. Protestants have simply clung to the shreds of the old garment of Christianity, and they have not given to the world any new positive regenerative principle. The Catholic Church has all the positive parts of the Protestant system of doctrine. The Protestants simply took over that whole scheme of things, which starts with the fall of man, with an atonement wrought out by a dying God midway, and an eternal hell at the end. They did not bring any new idea into the religious world at all, for freedom of conscience or thought is not a new faith in itself. It only means an opportunity to think new thought; and before there can be a new faith there must be new ideas. And Protestantism has failed to give us any new ideas of life and of society. It regards moral idealism as exhausted in the teachings of the bible, or at least in the teachings of Jesus; it has not attempted to elaborate any ideal of social righteousness for the world, which might articulate for men their vague but real aspirations in this direction. For this is what the world wants—not the bible, nor revisions of it, nor a rational understanding of it; no, nor Jesus himself, nor a true estimate of his life and work, but an era of social righteousness. And this Protestantism has not given us, indeed has made no attempt to give us; for its thought of a perfect social order is in no sense different from that of Catholicism, as being something which shall be accomplished elsewhere, something which is not to be created by us, something which has no relation to the actual world in which we live. Protestantism, as Christianity in general, has given a kind of sanction to the order of society it finds, and feels little impulse to create a new one. Therefore Protestantism must be superseded by a religion, which will teach not acquiescence and submission to the will of God, but which will hold up in contrast to what we see about us an idealized humanity, and will issue the stern command that "This you your selves must create." The world does not need an ecclesiastical religion, with priests and prayers and holy books; it needs a religion of truth and justice. It has no use for a religion which teaches man to trust in an outside justice, but one that will inspire men to practise justice themselves. It does not need a religion which teaches men to rely upon another for human benefits; it needs a religion that will inspire them with self-reliance; and will hear the only command which comes from the Unseen "THOU must do the justice which thou cravest."

In fact the only thing that Protestantism did was to change the method and perform the same work in a little different way; but it had in mind always the same end as the Catholic Church—the salvation of the individual soul after death. To the Catholic salvation means membership in the one true church, reception of the sacraments as evidence of such membership, and in its perfect order withdrawal from the world of every day affairs. To the Protestant salvation is a matter not of acting, but of feeling; not of outward conformity, but of inward experience; not of the offices of the church but of the grace of God; but whatever the difference in interpretation, the ideal is in both cases the same—that of the salvation of the individual soul after death. The Catholic and the Protestant may have different ideas as to the way in which this salvation is to be secured, but they are working to exactly the same end. Here before them is a lost soul—doomed to eternal punishment because of its inherited sin—and their task as they understand it is to save that soul from the doom prepared for it in the world to come. "What shall I do to be saved?" this is the question that has controlled the lives of all Protestants as well as all Catholics. And for this very reason Protestantism has failed, failed to give the world that which it needs and wants—salvation for itself from the evils which really exist now and not salvation for the individuals in it from imaginary evils in an imaginary existence. We need a new conception of religion which will focus its attention not upon individual men but upon men in the mass; which will take as its aim not primarily the salvation of the soul, but the redemption of the world; it must realize that its highest function is not as the Catholic conceives it, the filling of monasteries with monks and nuns; not as the Protestant believes the crowding of a mourner's bench with repentent sinners; not as both hold the building of a kingdom of God in heaven; but the building of the kingdom of man upon the earth.

Here is the world with its hungry to be fed, its naked to be clothed, its sick to be healed. Here is the world with its evils to be exterminated, its misery to be banished, its injustice to be cured, its sorrow to be turned to joy. Here is the world with the strong preying upon the weak, the rich grinding the faces of the poor, the few revelling in the luxury and ease built upon the wretchedness of many. Here is the world with its international hatreds and racial prejudices, with its rotten politics and corrupt business, with its frightful poverty and equally frightful wealth, with its passion for riches and its lust for power, with its industrial injustice and its social inequity. And we need a

religion whose business it is, not to abandon this world to its own devices, but to save it to its own best ideals; not to save such few individuals out of the world as can be seized and rescued, but to keep men and women right where they are, without any thought of their souls in the hereafter, and to make this world in which they live now a place that is fit for their habitation—not to desert the ship as a hopeless wreck, saving such passengers as may find place within the lifeboats, but to stand by her every man and make her seaworthy.

The Protestant church as the Catholic church has been regarded as a passive witness of salvation instead of an active agent of salvation. It has been the body of those who have been saved from the evils of the world instead of the bodies of those who are the saviours of the world from the evils which assail it. It has been a place of refuge where men could flee for safety; it should be an armory where men may come to arm themselves against the evils of the world. It has been a place where men have come for help which they might receive,—men have gone to it for strength in the hour of weakness, for light in the hour of darkness, for consolation in the hour of sorrow. They have gone to God's altar that they might escape the tumult and the shouting of the world, and find rest for their souls. Now this service of bringing relief to the weary and heavy laden the church should offer; but this function should be wholly subordinated to its greater function. And I see already the coming of a day when men shall come to the church, not for what they can receive but for what they can give; not to be entertained or instructed, but to be equipped in the whole armour of right that they may again venture forth to die for the redemption of mankind; not to flee from the world, but to be prepared to enter into the world as good soldiers of truth and justice. And then the church shall be, not the company of saints, not the assembly of the converted, not the congregation of the faithful, not a club of people who like to worship together and pray together; but a great host of servants of the public good, of saviours of humanity, of fighters of the good fight for justice, righteousness, truth—this is the kind of church the world needs.

And who are preparing the way for such a church and religion? Not Protestants as such, not Catholics as such, not Christians as such, not ministers and churches as such, but they who any where or under any name utter or listen to a call of righteousness, justice, truth. Now and then a man dares lift up his voice against supernaturalism and the opponents of truth; now and then a man denounces unprincipled wealth and power; now and

then a man demands that public ends be put above private ends in politics, in business, everywhere; now and then a man appeals to the community to create for itself a better and nobler life; and these, though they speak not specifically of religion, are the voices in the night that tell of the coming day; they are the witnesses to an unbelieving age of an ideal truth and an ideal authority; and so where Protestantism and Christianity have failed they shall succeed and triumph. Such men in all ages have sought to express their aspirations in some system of spiritual fellowship; and this new idealism of which they are possessed will in time express itself in the form of a new church as described by one of our Unitarian fathers—Ralph Waldo Emerson—a church, which will be founded on moral science; whose ministers will be the poets, the artists, the musicians, the scientists; whose bible will be the noblest literature of the whole world; whose sacraments will be love and labor; whose supreme being will be truth; and whose saviours will be all who have suffered for humanity.

Amid the uncertainties caused by modern critical research, it is clear that the old religious sanctions are passing away, and that the Christian church is rapidly losing its hold upon mankind. The scientific spirit of the last generation has left it utterly and hopelessly behind. Unwilling to adjust itself to modern knowledge, cleaving with all of its entrenched power to forms of worship and doctrines that science has disapproved forever, the church can no longer lead, and it refuses to follow—it lives on the prestige it enjoyed in more credulous days. The Protestant church, as well as the Catholic, is passing away; and in their place shall rise a new and more glorious church than the world has ever known. All hail to the Church of Man! Let us speed its coming!

It is the custom to publish Mr. Dietrich's addresses in a series of eight numbers during the church year, one address each month being selected for that purpose. Many of these are out of print, but the titles listed below are still available and may be obtained by application to The Publication Committee, 803 LaSalle Ave., Minneapolis, at the price of 10 cents per copy.

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